

Trip Report: Ethiopia and Eritrea

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Babies wailing and screeching, desperately trying to get nourishment from their mothers' breasts.

Two- and three-year-olds so severely malnourished that they cannot stand, much less crawl or walk, their pencil-thin legs so frail that they could be snapped like a twig with little or no effort.

Young boys and girls with bloated bellies. A teenager whose legs are no thicker than my wrist.

Drinking water almost non-existent – a four-hour walk each way just to find some. Fields scorched. Crops failed.

River beds dry as a bone. Hand-dug collecting ponds for rain so sunbaked that the earth has cracked.

Disease. Despair.

These are some of the horrific sites I witnessed last week in Ethiopia, which once again is facing a famine of catastrophic proportions.

I spent a week in Ethiopia in 1984 – when nearly one million people died of starvation – including two nights in a feeding camp. The squalid conditions of the camps and the suffering faces of the children, mothers and elderly was haunting and unforgettable. What I saw – and experienced – changed me forever. I never thought I would see something like that again. I have. Last week.

By Easter, thousands of Ethiopians could be dead from starvation. Children living in villages just 90 miles from the capital city, Addis Ababa, which is easily accessible by



The distended stomach of this 6-year-old boy illustrates the severity of the hunger problem in Ethiopia. 11 million Ethiopians are at risk.

truck, are already near death. Conditions in villages in more remote areas of the country are significantly worse.

Dire Situation

While the government of Ethiopia is out in front of trying to draw attention to the crisis – unlike in 1984 when the Mengistu government tried to keep the famine secret until a BBC camera crew broke the story – what makes this year's crisis more horrific is that the population of Ethiopia has increased from 45 million in 1984 to 69 million today. In addition, HIV/AIDS is spreading throughout the country and Ethiopia's 2 ½-year border war with neighboring Eritrea has drained precious resources and led to thousands of displaced people and families, particularly in remote areas of the country.

With each crisis – drought, war, disease – more families become destitute and completely dependent on others for their welfare and survival. The repeated droughts have made more people vulnerable to hunger and hunger-related diseases, sharply increasing the danger of outright starvation among groups that may have been able to survive previous crop failures and livestock losses.

This also is a tough neighborhood, with Sudan bordering to the west and Somalia to the east. These countries are struggling to overcome internal turmoil of their own and refugees from each have crossed into Ethiopia and are living in refugee camps.

But perhaps the greatest difficulty is getting the world to respond. The focus in capital cities around the

globe is the war on terror, Iraq and North Korea.

How Could This Happen?

I do not believe this situation should ever have been allowed to develop. Does anyone really believe that the world would turn a blind eye if this crisis were unfolding in France or Australia? If the photographs in this report were of Norwegian children wouldn't the world be rushing to help? Is not the value of an Ethiopian child or Eritrean mother the same in the eyes of God?

This disaster has been building since last fall, yet there has been little mention of it in the Western media, let alone any in depth reports. Without graphic photographs and videotape, foreign governments will not feel the pressure to act.

The situation in Ethiopia is dire and many believe if immediate action is not taken to address the looming crisis, the number of people who could die from starvation could surpass those who perished during the 1984 -1985 drought. In 1984, 8 million were in need of food aid. Today, more than 11 million people



Infants and children are the most vulnerable. Most Ethiopians in the rural parts of the country are living on about 900 calories a day.

— just slightly less than the combined population of Maryland and Virginia — are presently at risk and that number is growing every day.

Last year's crops produced little or nothing, even in parts of the country that normally provide surpluses of food. The demand for international food aid is tremendous. I was told there is enough food in the country to meet January's needs and part of February's, although at reduced levels. Incredibly, there is nothing in the pipeline to deal with March, April, May, or the rest of the year. Even if ships loaded with grain were to leave today, many would not make it in time to avert disaster.

Villagers are living on about 900 calories a day. The average American lives on 2,200 to 2,400 calories a day.

An elderly woman at a feeding station in the northern part of the country showed me her monthly allotment of wheat: it would have fit into a bowling ball bag.

A man working under the hot African sun with fellow villagers to dig a massive rain collecting pond — each carrying 50-pound bags of dirt up from the bottom of the pit — told me he had not had a drink of water all day and didn't know if he would eat that night. It would depend on whether his children had food.

No Water

Water — for drinking and bathing — is almost non-existent, and what is available, is putrid. There is no medicine — and even if there was something as simple as an aspirin there is no water with which to wash it down. Disease is rampant.

During my trip I visited villages in both the north and south of the country. I went to a food distribution center and a health clinic. I talked with farmers who had already begun to sell off their livestock and mothers who did not know where or when their children would get their next meal. I met with U.S. State De-



partment officials and NGOs. I also met with Prime Minister Meles and a number of relief officials in his government.

The government's decision not to establish feeding camps is a wise one. The camps only exacerbate the crisis because they allow diseases to spread much more quickly and take people away from their homes and albeit limited support systems. In 1984, many families traveled great distances to reach the camps and by the time they got there were often near death. Moreover, villagers who left for the camps and somehow managed to survive had nothing to return to because they had lost their homes and sold their livestock.

Fortunately, relief organizations, including U.S. AID and the United Nations World Food Programme, have developed an early warning system to better predict the effects of the looming crisis and have been sounding the alarm since the fall.



This 3-year-old girl is one of the many starving Ethiopian children.



Fields are scorched and holding ponds for rainwater (above) are so sunbaked that the earth is cracked. There has been a total crop failure.

Nevertheless, they are facing an uphill battle. Donor fatigue is a very real problem.

Competing World Crises

Getting the world – and the United States, in particular – to focus on the issue is difficult because of the war on terrorism, the situation in Iraq and the growing crisis in North Korea.

Since August 2002, the United States has provided approximately 430,000 metric tons of food, valued at \$179 million. This amount constitutes approximately 25 percent of the total need in the country. The U.S. government will need to do more to avert a disaster of biblical proportions.

Before leaving on the trip, a number of well read people in the Washington area looked at me quiz-

zically when I told them I was going to Ethiopia. They all asked why? When I told them that the country was facing another famine along the scale of 1984, they were dumbfounded.

Time is of the essence. A village can slip dramatically in just a matter of weeks. Many of the children I saw last week will be dead by early February and those who do somehow miraculously survive will be severely retarded. The world cannot afford to wait any longer.

I also visited neighboring Eritrea, where the situation is not much better. Widespread crop failures are expected as a result of the drought. Compounding the situation are the lingering effects of its war with Ethiopia, which ended in December 2000. While nearly 200,000 refugees and displaced persons have

been reintegrated into society following the truce, almost 60,000 have been unable to return to their homes due to the presence of land mines, unexploded ordnance, insecurity or the simple fact that the infrastructure near their homes has been completely destroyed.

Recommendations

- Donors, including the United States, must make prompt and significant food-aid pledges to help Ethiopia overcome its current crisis. The food pipeline could break down as early as next month if donors do not act immediately. There are a number of countries, Canada and France, for instance, that can and should do more.

- The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) must work to ensure that the U.S. assistance is released as quickly as possible.

- When President Bush visits Africa, he should consider going to Ethiopia. I believe he would be moved by what he sees.

- The Bush Administration should make an effort to rally public support similar to what was done during the 1984-85 famine. Perhaps the new director of faith-based initiatives at USAID should serve as the coordinator for such an effort.

- Donor support also must include water, seeds and medicine as well as veterinary assistance.

- The Ethiopian government should take its case to capitals around the globe, sending representatives to donor nations armed with photographs of dying children to put a face on the growing crisis. Regrettably, if they do not ask, they will not receive.

- The Ethiopian government must contribute additional food aid from its own resources as it did in 2000 and 2002 as a sign of leadership and commitment to the welfare of its people.

- More must be done to develop long-term strategies to tackle the root causes of the food shortages in Ethiopia, like improving irrigation and developing drought-resistant crops. The government must develop a 10- or 15-year plan designed to help end the constant cycle of massive food shortages. A well developed plan would go a long way toward reassuring the international community that the country wants to end its dependence on handouts.

- The Ethiopian government also should do more to help diversify its economy. Its largest export – coffee – is subject to huge price fluctuations in the world market and rather than exporting hides and leather to Italy and China – only to come back

as belts, purses and shoes – the government should work to attract business that will make these products on Ethiopian soil.

- The government of Ethiopia also should consider a sweeping land reform policy that would allow farmers to own their property rather than the government owning all the country's land, a vestige of the country's socialist days.

- The media needs to more aggressively pursue this looming crisis. It was responsible for making the world aware of the terrible famine that was occurring in 1984 and has the ability to let the world know about the tragedy unfolding again.

- Many of the same issues that apply to Ethiopia apply to Eritrea. Both countries are in desperate need of assistance.

In closing, I want to thank all the people – from government officials in both Ethiopia and Eritrea to U.S. officials and NGOs and missionaries in both countries – who are working around the clock to deal with this crisis. I also want to thank U.S. Ambassador to Eritrea Donald McConnell and U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Aurelia Brazeal and their respective staffs for all they do. They are outstanding representatives of the U.S. government. Special thanks go to Jack Doutrich in Eritrea and Karen Freeman, Jo Raisin and Makeda Tsegaye in Ethiopia. Roy "Reb" Brownell with USAID in Washington also deserves special recognition.

Finally, I want to thank Lt. Col. Malcom Shorter, who accompanied me on the trip, and Dan Scandling, my chief of staff, who took all the photographs and videotaped the trip. ■



Since August, the United States has provided \$179 million in food aid to Ethiopia.